

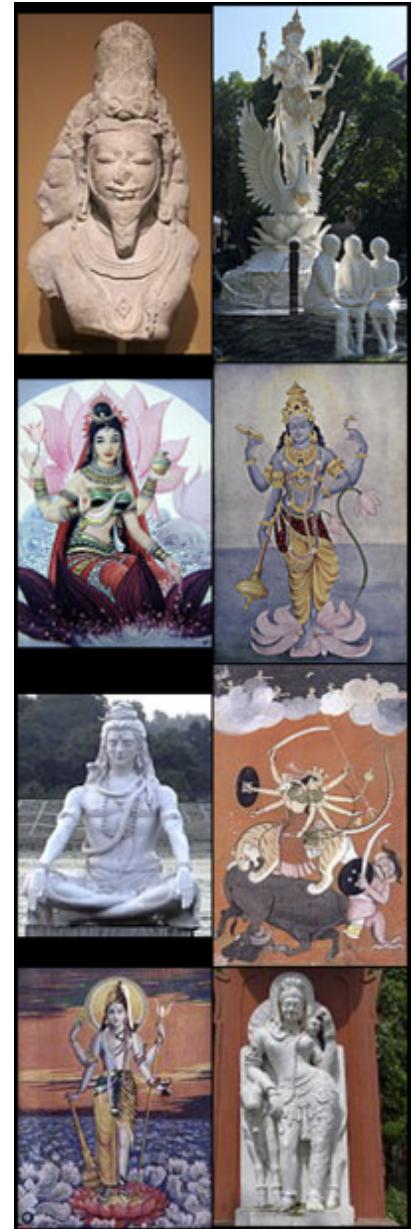
# Hindu deities

**Hindu deities** are the gods and goddesses in [Hinduism](#). The terms and epithets for deities within the diverse traditions of Hinduism vary, and include [Deva](#), [Devi](#), [Ishvara](#), [Ishvari](#), [Bhagavān](#) and [Bhagavati](#).<sup>[1][2][note 1]</sup>

The deities of Hinduism have evolved from the [Vedic era](#) (2nd millennium BCE) through the medieval era (1st millennium CE), regionally within [Nepal](#), [India](#) and in [Southeast Asia](#), and across Hinduism's diverse traditions.<sup>[3][4]</sup> The Hindu deity concept varies from a personal god as in [Yoga school of Hindu philosophy](#),<sup>[5][6]</sup> to 33 Vedic deities,<sup>[7]</sup> to hundreds of Puranas of Hinduism.<sup>[8]</sup> Illustrations of major deities include [Vishnu](#), [Lakshmi](#), [Shiva](#), [Parvati](#), [Brahma](#) and [Saraswati](#). These deities have distinct and complex personalities, yet are often viewed as aspects of the same Ultimate Reality called [Brahman](#).<sup>[9][note 2]</sup> From ancient times, the idea of equivalence has been cherished for all Hindus, in its texts and in early 1st-millennium sculpture with concepts such as [Harihara](#) (Half Vishnu, Half Shiva)<sup>[10]</sup> and [Ardhanārīshvara](#) (half Shiva, half Parvati),<sup>[11]</sup> with myths and temples that feature them together, declaring they are the same.<sup>[12][13][14]</sup> Major deities have inspired their own Hindu traditions, such as [Vaishnavism](#), [Shaivism](#) and [Shaktism](#), but with shared [mythology](#), [ritual grammar](#), [theosophy](#), [axiology](#) and [polycentrism](#).<sup>[15][16][17]</sup> Some Hindu traditions, such as [Smartism](#) from the mid 1st millennium CE, have included multiple major deities as [henotheistic](#) manifestations of [Saguna](#) Brahman, and as a means to realizing [Nirguna](#) Brahman.<sup>[18][19][20]</sup> In [Samkhya](#) philosophy, [Devata](#) or *deities* are considered as "natural sources of energy" who have [Sattva](#) as the dominant [Guna](#).<sup>[21]</sup>

Hindu deities are represented with various icons and anicons, in paintings and sculptures, called [Murtis](#) and [Pratimas](#).<sup>[22][23][24]</sup> Some Hindu traditions, such as ancient [Charvakas](#), rejected all deities and concept of god or goddess,<sup>[25][26][27]</sup> while 19th-century British colonial era movements such as the [Arya Samaj](#) and [Brahmo Samaj](#) rejected deities and adopted monotheistic concepts similar to [Abrahamic religions](#).<sup>[28][29]</sup> Hindu deities have been adopted in other religions such as [Jainism](#),<sup>[30]</sup> and in regions outside India, such as predominantly Buddhist [Thailand](#) and [Japan](#), where they continue to be revered in regional temples or arts.<sup>[31][32][33]</sup>

In ancient and medieval era texts of Hinduism, the human body is described as a temple,<sup>[34][35]</sup> and deities are described to be parts residing within it,<sup>[36][37]</sup> while the [Brahman](#) (Absolute Reality, God)<sup>[18][38]</sup> is described to be the same, or of similar nature, as the [Atman](#) (Self), which Hindus believe is eternal and within every living being.<sup>[39][40][41]</sup> Deities in Hinduism are as diverse as its traditions, and a Hindu can choose to be polytheistic, pantheistic, monotheistic, monistic, agnostic, atheistic, or humanist.<sup>[42][43][44]</sup>



Examples of Hindu deities (from top): [Brahma](#), [Saraswati](#), [Lakshmi](#), [Vishnu](#), [Shiva](#), [Durga](#), [Harihara](#) and [Ardhanarishvara](#).

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## Devas and devis

Deities in Hinduism are referred to as [Deva](#) (masculine) and [Devi](#) (feminine).<sup>[45][46][47]</sup> The root of these terms mean "heavenly, divine, anything of excellence".<sup>[48]</sup>

In the earliest Vedic literature, all [supernatural beings](#) are called [Asuras](#).<sup>[49][50]</sup> By the late Vedic period (~500 BCE), benevolent supernatural beings are referred to as [Deva-Asuras](#). In post-Vedic texts, such as the [Puranas](#) and the [Itihasas](#) of Hinduism, the Devas represent the good, and the Asuras the bad.<sup>[3][4]</sup> In some medieval Indian literature, [Devas](#) are also referred to as [Suras](#) and contrasted with their equally powerful, but malevolent [half-brothers](#) referred to as the Asuras.<sup>[51]</sup>

Hindu deities are part of [Indian mythology](#), both Devas and Devis feature in one of many cosmological theories in [Hinduism](#).<sup>[52][53]</sup>

## Characteristics of Vedic-era deities

In Vedic literature, Devas and Devis represent the forces of nature and some represent moral values (such as the [Adityas](#), [Varuna](#), and [Mitra](#)), each symbolizing the epitome of a specialized knowledge, creative energy, exalted and magical powers ([Siddhis](#)).<sup>[54][55]</sup>

The most referred to Devas in the [Rig Veda](#) are [Indra](#), [Agni](#) (fire) and [Soma](#), with "fire deity" called the



Vedic era deities evolved over time. Rudra (left) is represented in Vedic literature, is shown as Shiva-Rudra 2nd-century sculpture (middle), and as Shiva (meaning kind) in 13th-century art work (right). The iconography evolved, retaining some symbolic elements such as trident, axe or antelope.<sup>[56][57]</sup>

friend of all humanity, it and Soma being the two celebrated in a yajna fire ritual that marks major Hindu ceremonies. Savitr, Vishnu, Rudra (later given the exclusive epithet of Shiva), and Prajapati (later Brahma) are gods and hence Devas.<sup>[31]</sup>

The Vedas describes a number of significant Devis such as Ushas (dawn), Prithvi (earth), Aditi (cosmic moral order), Saraswati (river, knowledge), Vāc (sound), Nirṛti (destruction), Ratri (night), Aranyani (forest), and bounty goddesses such as Dinsana, Raka, Puramdhī, Parendī, Bharati, Mahi among others are mentioned in the Rigveda.<sup>[58]</sup> Sri, also called Lakshmi, appears in late Vedic texts dated to be pre-Buddhist, but verses dedicated to her do not suggest that her characteristics were fully developed in the Vedic era.<sup>[59]</sup> All gods and goddesses are distinguished in the Vedic times, but in the post-Vedic texts (~500 BCE to 200 CE), and particularly in the early medieval era literature, they are ultimately seen as aspects or manifestations of one Brahman, the Supreme power.<sup>[59][60]</sup>

Ananda Coomaraswamy states that Devas and Asuras in the Vedic lore are similar to Angels-Theoi-Gods and Titans of Greek mythology, both are powerful but have different orientations and inclinations, the Devas representing the powers of Light and the Asuras representing the powers of Darkness in Hindu mythology.<sup>[61][62]</sup> According to Coomaraswamy's interpretation of Devas and Asuras, both these natures exist in each human being, the tyrant and the angel is within each being, the best and the worst within each person struggles before choices and one's own nature, and the Hindu formulation of Devas and Asuras is an eternal dance between these within each person.<sup>[63][64]</sup>

The Devas and Asuras, Angels and Titans, powers of Light and powers of Darkness in Rigveda, although distinct and opposite in operation, are in essence consubstantial, their distinction being a matter not of essence but of orientation, revolution or transformation. In this case, the Titan is potentially an Angel, the Angel still by nature a Titan; the Darkness in *actu* is Light, the Light in *potentia* Darkness; whence the designations Asura and Deva may be applied to one and the same Person according to the mode of operation, as in Rigveda 1.163.3, "Trita art thou (Agni) by interior operation".

— Ananda Coomaraswamy, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*<sup>[62]</sup>

## Characteristics of medieval-era deities

In the Puranas and the Itihasas with the embedded Bhagavad Gita, the Devas represent the good, and the Asuras the bad.<sup>[3][4]</sup> According to the Bhagavad Gita (16.6–16.7), all beings in the universe have both the divine qualities (*daivi sampad*) and the demonic qualities (*asuri sampad*) within each.<sup>[4][65]</sup> The sixteenth

chapter of the Bhagavad Gita states that pure god-like saints are rare and pure demon-like evil are rare among human beings, and the bulk of humanity is multi-charactered with a few or many faults.<sup>[4]</sup> According to Jeaneane Fowler, the Gita states that desires, aversions, greed, needs, emotions in various forms "are facets of ordinary lives", and it is only when they turn to lust, hate, cravings, arrogance, conceit, anger, harshness, hypocrisy, violence, cruelty and such negativity- and destruction-inclined that natural human inclinations metamorphose into something demonic (Asura).<sup>[4][65]</sup>

The Epics and medieval era texts, particularly the Puranas, developed extensive and richly varying mythologies associated with Hindu deities, including their genealogies.<sup>[66][67][68]</sup> Several of the Purana texts are named after major Hindu deities such as Vishnu, Shiva and Devi.<sup>[66]</sup> Other texts and commentators such as Adi Shankara explain that Hindu deities live or rule over the cosmic body as well in the temple of human body.<sup>[34][69]</sup> They remark that the Sun deity is the eyes, the Vāyu the nose, the Prajapati the sexual organs, the Lokapalas the ears, Chandra the mind, Mitra the inward breath, Varuna the outward breath, Indra the arms, Bṛhaspati the speech, Vishnu, whose stride is great, is the feet, and Māyā is the smile.<sup>[69]</sup>

## Symbolism

Edelmann states that gods and anti-gods of Hinduism are symbolism for spiritual concepts. For example, god Indra (a Deva) and the antigod Virocana (an Asura) question a sage for insights into the knowledge of the self.<sup>[70]</sup> Virocana leaves with the first given answer, believing now he can use the knowledge as a weapon. In contrast, Indra keeps pressing the sage, churning the ideas, and learning about means to inner happiness and power. Edelmann suggests that the Deva-Asura dichotomies in Hindu mythology may be seen as "narrative depictions of tendencies within our selves".<sup>[70]</sup> Hindu deities in Vedic era, states Mahoney, are those artists with "powerfully inward transformative, effective and creative mental powers".<sup>[71]</sup>

In Hindu mythology, everyone starts as an Asura, born of the same father. "Asuras who remain Asura" share the character of powerful beings craving for more power, more wealth, ego, anger, unprincipled nature, force and violence.<sup>[72][73]</sup> The "Asuras who become Devas" in contrast are driven by an inner voice, seek understanding and meaning, prefer moderation, principled behavior, aligned with Rta and Dharma, knowledge and harmony.<sup>[72][73][74]</sup>

The god (Deva) and antigod (Asura), states Edelmann, are also symbolically the contradictory forces that motivate each individual and people, and thus Deva-Asura dichotomy is a spiritual concept rather than mere genealogical category or species of being.<sup>[75]</sup> In the Bhāgavata Purana, saints and gods are born in families of Asuras, such as Mahabali and Prahlada, conveying the symbolism that motivations, beliefs and actions rather than one's birth and family circumstances define whether one is Deva-like or Asura-like.<sup>[75]</sup>

## Ishvara

Another Hindu term that is sometimes translated as deity is Ishvara, or alternatively various deities are described, state Sorajjakool et al., as "the personifications of various aspects of one and the same Ishvara".<sup>[76]</sup> The term *Ishvara* has a wide range of meanings that depend on the era and the school of Hinduism.<sup>[77][78][79]</sup> In ancient texts of Indian philosophy, *Ishvara* means supreme Self, Brahman (Highest



Indra is a Vedic era deity, found in south and southeast Asia. Above Indra is part of the seal of a Thailand state.

Reality), ruler, king or husband depending on the context.<sup>[77]</sup> In medieval era texts, *Ishvara* means God, Supreme Being, personal god, or special Self depending on the school of Hinduism.<sup>[2][79][80]</sup>

Among the six systems of Hindu philosophy, *Samkhya* and *Mimamsa* do not consider the concept of *Ishvara*, i.e., a supreme being, relevant. *Yoga*, *Vaisheshika*, *Vedanta* and *Nyaya* schools of Hinduism discuss *Ishvara*, but assign different meanings.

Early Nyaya school scholars considered the hypothesis of a deity as a creator God with the power to grant blessings, boons and fruits; but these early Nyaya scholars then rejected this hypothesis, and were non-theistic or atheists.<sup>[26][81]</sup> Later scholars of Nyaya school reconsidered this question and offered counter arguments for what is *Ishvara* and various arguments to prove the existence of omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent deity (God).<sup>[82]</sup>

Vaisheshika school of Hinduism, as founded by Kanada in 1st millennium BCE, neither required nor relied on creator deity.<sup>[83][84]</sup>

Later Vaisheshika school adopted the concept of *Ishvara*, states Klaus Klostermaier, but as an eternal God who co-exists in the universe with eternal substances and atoms, but He "winds up the clock, and lets it run its course".<sup>[83]</sup>

Ancient Mimamsa scholars of Hinduism questioned what is *Ishvara* (deity, God)?<sup>[85]</sup> They considered a deity concept unnecessary for a consistent philosophy and *moksha* (soteriology).<sup>[85][86]</sup>

In Samkhya school of Hindu philosophy, *Isvara* is neither a creator-God, nor a savior-God.<sup>[87]</sup> This is called one of the several major atheistic schools of Hinduism by some scholars.<sup>[88][89][90]</sup> Others, such as Jacobsen, state that Samkhya is more accurately described as non-theistic.<sup>[91]</sup> Deity is considered an irrelevant concept, neither defined nor denied, in Samkhya school of Hindu philosophy.<sup>[92]</sup>

In Yoga school of Hinduism, it is any "personal deity" (*Ishta Deva* or *Ishta Devata*)<sup>[93]</sup> or "spiritual inspiration", but not a creator God.<sup>[80][88]</sup> Whicher explains that while Patanjali's terse verses in the *Yogasutras* can be interpreted both as theistic or non-theistic, Patanjali's concept of *Isvara* in Yoga philosophy functions as a "transformative catalyst or guide for aiding the yogin on the path to spiritual emancipation".<sup>[94]</sup>

The *Advaita Vedanta* school of Hinduism asserted that there is no dualistic existence of deity (or deities).<sup>[95][96]</sup> There is no otherness nor distinction between *Jiva* and *Ishvara*.<sup>[97][98]</sup> God (*Ishvara*, *Brahman*) is identical with the *Atman* (Self) within each human being in *Advaita Vedanta* school,<sup>[99]</sup> and there is a monistic Universal Absolute Oneness that connects everyone and everything, states this school of Hinduism.<sup>[40][98][100]</sup> This school, states Anantanand Rambachan, has "perhaps exerted the most widespread influence".<sup>[101]</sup>

The *Dvaita* sub-school of *Vedanta* Hinduism, founded in medieval era, *Ishvara* is defined as a creator God that is distinct from *Jiva* (individual Selfs in living beings).<sup>[41]</sup> In this school, God creates individual Selfs (*Atman*), but the individual Selfs never was and never will become one with God; the best it can do is to experience bliss by getting infinitely close to God.<sup>[20]</sup>



*Ishvara* is, along with *Shiva*, *Vishnu* and *Brahma*, one of the 17 deities commonly found in Indonesian *Surya Majapahit* Hindu arts and records. However, *Ishvara* represents different concept in various Hindu philosophies.

## Number of deities

**Yantra as aniconic deities**

Yāska, the earliest known language scholar of India (~500 BCE), notes Wilkins, mentions that there are three deities (*Devas*) according to the Vedas, "Agni (fire), whose place is on the earth; Vayu (wind), whose place is the air; and Surya (sun), whose place is in the sky".<sup>[106]</sup> This principle of three worlds (or zones), and its multiples is found thereafter in many ancient texts. The *Samhitas*, which are the oldest layer of text in *Vedas* enumerate 33 devas,<sup>[note 3]</sup> either 11 each for the three worlds, or as 12 *Adityas*, 11 *Rudras*, 8 *Vasus* and 2 *Ashvins* in the *Brahmanas* layer of Vedic texts.<sup>[7][48]</sup>

The Rigveda states in hymn 1.139.11,

ये देवासो दिव्येकादश स्थ पृथिव्यामध्येकादश स्थ ।  
आप्सुक्षितो महिनैकादश स्थ ते देवासो यज्ञमिमं जुषध्वम् ॥  
११ ॥<sup>[110]</sup>

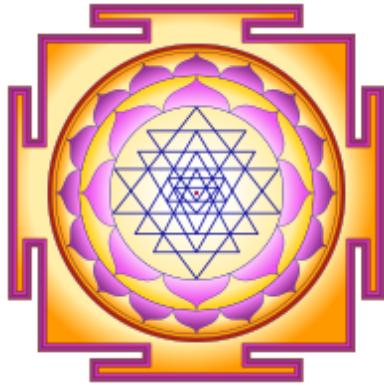
O ye eleven gods whose home is heaven, O ye eleven who make earth your dwelling,  
Ye who with might, eleven, live in waters, accept this sacrifice, O gods, with pleasure.

— Translated by Ralph T. H. Griffith<sup>[111]</sup>

Gods who are eleven in heaven; who are eleven on earth;  
and who are eleven dwelling with glory in mid-air;  
may ye be pleased with this our sacrifice.

— Translated by HH Wilson<sup>[112]</sup>

— Rigveda 1.139.11



Sri Yantra symbolizing the goddess Tripura Sundari

Yantras or *mandalas* (shown) are 3-D images.<sup>[102]</sup> In Tantra, a minority tradition in Hinduism,<sup>[103]</sup> they are considered identical with deity.<sup>[104]</sup> Similar tantric yantras are found in Jainism and Buddhism as well.<sup>[105]</sup>

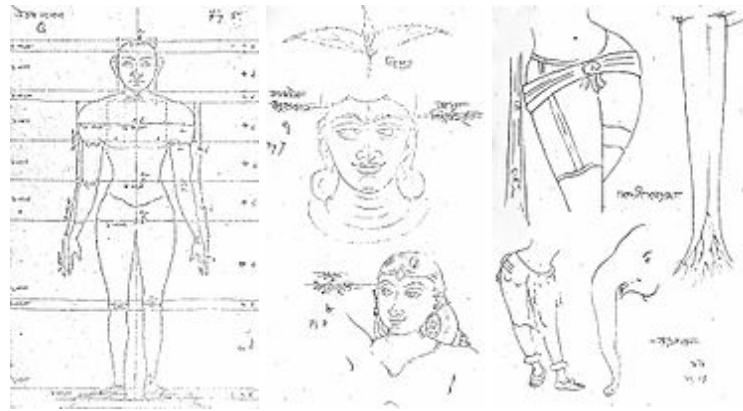
## One or one-ness

Thirty-three *koti* (33 type) divinities are mentioned in other ancient texts, such as the *Yajurveda*. Most by far, are goddesses state Foulston and Abbott, suggesting "how important and popular goddesses are" in Hindu culture.<sup>[113]</sup> Scholars state all deities are typically viewed in Hinduism as "emanations or manifestation of genderless principle called *Brahman*, representing the many facets of Ultimate Reality".<sup>[113][114][115]</sup>

This concept of God in Hinduism "God, the universe, human beings and all else is essentially one thing" and everything is connected oneness, the same god is in every human being as *Atman*, the eternal Self.<sup>[115][116]</sup> Parallels between Allah in Islam or Ein Sof in Kabbalah and Brahman have been drawn by many scholars in the past as well as in recent times.

## Iconography and practices

Hinduism has an ancient and extensive iconography tradition, particularly in the form of *Murti* (Sanskrit: मूर्ति, IAST: Mūrti), or *Vigraha* or *Pratima*.<sup>[23]</sup> A *Murti* is itself not the god in Hinduism, but it is an image of god and represents emotional and religious value.<sup>[122]</sup> A literal translation of *Murti* as idol is incorrect, states Jeaneane Fowler, when idol is understood as superstitious end in itself.<sup>[122]</sup> Just like the photograph of a person is not the real person, a *Murti* is an image in Hinduism but not the real thing, but in both cases the



Proper *Murti* design is described in ancient and medieval Indian texts (Bengali). They describe proportions, posture, expressions among other details, often referencing to nature.<sup>[117][118][119]</sup>

image reminds of something of emotional and real value to the viewer.<sup>[122]</sup> When a person worships a *Murti*, it is assumed to be a manifestation of the essence or spirit of the deity, the worshipper's spiritual ideas and needs are meditated through it, yet the idea of ultimate reality or Brahman is not confined in it.<sup>[122]</sup>

A *Murti* of a Hindu deity is typically made by carving stone, wood working, metal casting or through pottery. Medieval era texts describing their proper proportions, positions and gestures include the Puranas, Agamas and Samhitas particularly the Shilpa Shastras.<sup>[22]</sup> The expressions in a *Murti* vary in diverse Hindu traditions, ranging from Ugra symbolism to express destruction, fear and violence (Durga, Parvati, Kali), as well as Saumya symbolism to express joy, knowledge and harmony (Parvati, Saraswati, Lakshmi). Saumya images are most common in Hindu temples.<sup>[123]</sup> Other *Murti* forms found in Hinduism include the Linga.<sup>[124]</sup>

A *Murti* is an embodiment of the divine, the Ultimate Reality or Brahman to some Hindus.<sup>[22]</sup> In religious context, they are found in Hindu temples or homes, where they may be treated as a beloved guest and serve as a participant of Puja rituals in Hinduism.<sup>[125]</sup> A murti is installed by priests, in Hindu temples, through the Prana Pratishta ceremony,<sup>[126]</sup> whereby state Harold Coward and David Goa, the "divine vital energy of the cosmos is infused into the sculpture" and then the divine is welcomed as one would welcome a friend.<sup>[127]</sup> In other occasions, it serves as the center of attention in annual festive processions and these are called Utsava Murti.<sup>[128]</sup>

## Temple and worship

In Hinduism, deities and their icons may be hosted in a Hindu temple, within a home or as an amulet. The

### A Hindu prayer before cutting a tree for a *Murti*

Oh Tree! you have been selected for the worship of a deity,  
 Salutations to you!  
 I worship you per rules, kindly accept it.  
 May all who live in this tree, find residence elsewhere,  
 May they forgive us now, we bow to them.

—*Brihat Samhita* 59.10 - 59.11<sup>[120][121]</sup>



Along with *Murti*, Hindus use nature and aniconic symbols for deities. Linga(left) symbolizes Shiva- along with Parvati,<sup>[129]</sup> *Tulsi* plant in a square base (center) is symbolism for Vishnu,<sup>[130]</sup> and sunrise (or rivers) are revered as aspects of the spiritual everywhere.<sup>[131]</sup>

worship performed by Hindus is known by a number of regional names, such as *Puja*.<sup>[132]</sup> This practice in front of a *murti* may be elaborate in large temples, or be a simple song or mantra muttered in home, or offering made to sunrise or river or symbolic anicon of a deity.<sup>[133][134][135]</sup> Archaeological evidence of deity worship in Hindu temples trace *Puja* rituals to Gupta Empire era (~4th century CE).<sup>[136][137]</sup> In Hindu temples, various pujas may be performed daily at various times of the day; in other temples, it may be occasional.<sup>[138][139]</sup>

The *Puja* practice is structured as an act of welcoming, hosting, honoring the deity of one's choice as one's honored guest,<sup>[140]</sup> and remembering the spiritual and emotional significance the deity represents to the devotee.<sup>[122][132]</sup> Jan Gonda, as well as Diana L. Eck, states that a typical *Puja* involves one or more of 16 steps (*Shodasha Upachara*) traceable to ancient times: the deity is invited as a guest, the devotee hosts and takes care of the deity as an honored guest, praise (hymns) with *Dhupa* or *Aarti* along with food (*Naivedhya*) is offered to the deity, after an expression of love and respect the host takes leave, and with affection expresses good bye to the deity.<sup>[141][142]</sup> The worship practice may also involve reflecting on spiritual questions, with image serving as support for such meditation.<sup>[143]</sup>

Deity worship (*Bhakti*), visiting temples and *Puja* rites are not mandatory and is optional in Hinduism; it is the choice of a Hindu, it may be a routine daily affair for some Hindus, periodic ritual or infrequent for some.<sup>[144][145]</sup> Worship practices in Hinduism are as diverse as its traditions, and a Hindu can choose to be polytheistic, pantheistic, monotheistic, monistic, agnostic, atheistic, or humanist.<sup>[42]</sup>

## Examples

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Major deities have inspired a vast genre of literature such as the Puranas and Agama texts as well their own Hindu traditions, but with shared mythology, ritual grammar, theosophy, axiology and polycentrism.<sup>[16][17]</sup> Vishnu and his avatars are at the foundation of Vaishnavism, Shiva for Shaivism, Devi for Shaktism, and some Hindu traditions such as Smarta traditions who revere multiple major deities (five) as henotheistic manifestations of Brahman (absolute metaphysical Reality).<sup>[114][146][147]</sup>

While there are diverse deities in Hinduism, states Lawrence, "Exclusivism – which maintains that only one's own deity is real" is rare in Hinduism.<sup>[114]</sup> Julius Lipner, and other scholars, state that pluralism and "polycentrism" – where other deities are recognized and revered by members of different "denominations", has been the Hindu ethos and way of life.<sup>[16][148]</sup>

## Trimurti and Tridevi

The concept of Triad (or *Trimurti*, *Trinity*) makes a relatively late appearance in Hindu literature, or in the second half of 1st millennium BCE.<sup>[149]</sup> The idea of triad, playing three roles in the cosmic affairs, is typically associated with Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva (also called *Mahesh*); however, this is not the only triad

in Hindu literature.<sup>[150]</sup> Other triads include *Tridevi*, of three goddesses – Lakshmi, Saraswati and Parvati in the text *Devi Mahatmya*, in the Shakta tradition, who further assert that Devi is the *Brahman* (Ultimate Reality) and it is her energy that empowers Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva.<sup>[149]</sup> The other triads, formulated as deities in ancient Indian literature, include Sun (creator), Air (sustainer) and Fire (destroyer); Prana (creator), Food (sustainer) and Time (destroyer).<sup>[149]</sup> These triads, states *Jan Gonda*, are in some mythologies grouped together without forming a Trinity, and in other times represented as equal, a unity and manifestations of one Brahman.<sup>[149]</sup> In the Puranas, for example, this idea of threefold "hypostatization" is expressed as follows,

They [Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva] exist through each other, and uphold each other; they are parts of one another; they subsist through one another; they are not for a moment separated; they never abandon one another.

— *Vayu Purana*, 5.17, Translated by *Jan Gonda*<sup>[149]</sup>

The triad appears in *Maitrayaniya Upanishad*, for the first time in recognized roles known ever since, where they are deployed to present the concept of three *Guṇa* – the innate nature, tendencies and inner forces found within every being and everything, whose balance transform and keeps changing the individual and the world.<sup>[150][151]</sup> It is in the medieval Puranic texts, *Trimurti* concepts appears in various context, from rituals to spiritual concepts.<sup>[149]</sup> The *Bhagavad Gita*, in verses 9.18, 10.21-23 and 11.15, asserts that the triad or trinity is manifestation of one Brahman, which Krishna affirms himself to be.<sup>[152]</sup> However, suggests Bailey, the mythology of triad is "not the influence nor the most important one" in Hindu traditions, rather the ideologies and spiritual concepts develop on their own foundations.<sup>[150]</sup> The triad, with Brahma creating, Vishnu preserving and Shiva destroying, balances the functioning of the whole universe.

## Avatars of Hindu deities

Hindu mythology has nurtured the concept of Avatar, which represents the descent of a deity on earth.<sup>[153][154]</sup> This concept is commonly translated as "incarnation",<sup>[153]</sup> and is an "appearance" or "manifestation".<sup>[155][156]</sup>

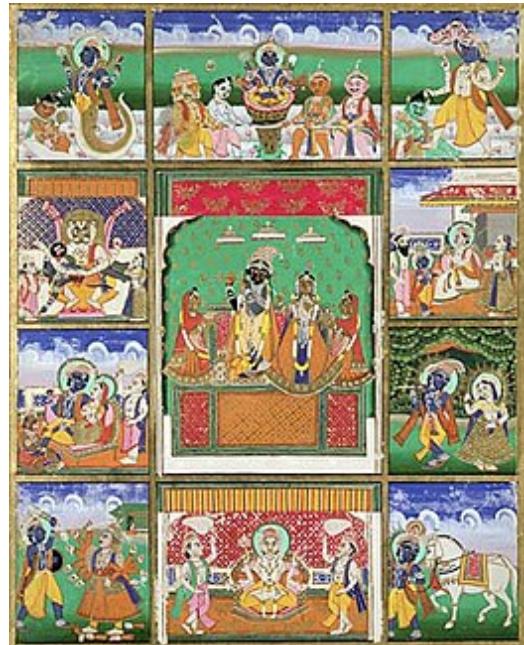
The concept of Avatar is most developed in *Vaishnavism* tradition, and associated with *Vishnu*, particularly with *Rama* and *Krishna*.<sup>[157][158]</sup> Vishnu takes numerous avatars in Hindu mythology. He becomes female, during the *Samudra manthan*, in the form of *Mohini*, to resolve a conflict between the *Devas* and *Asuras*. His male avatars include *Matsya*, *Kurma*, *Varaha*, *Narasimha*, *Vamana*, *Parashurama*, *Rama*, *Krishna*, *Buddha*, and *Kalki*.<sup>[158]</sup> Various texts, particularly the *Bhagavad Gita*, discuss the idea of Avatar of Vishnu appearing to restore the cosmic balance whenever the power of evil becomes excessive and causes persistent oppression in the world.<sup>[154]</sup>



A 10th century triad – Vishnu, Shiva and Brahma – from Bihar.

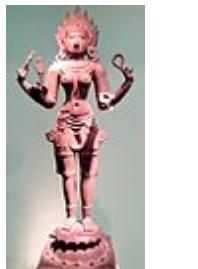
In Shaktism traditions, the concept appears in its legends as the various manifestations of Devi, the Divine Mother principal in Hinduism.<sup>[159]</sup> The avatars of Devi or Parvati include Durga and Kali, who are particularly revered in eastern states of India, as well as Tantra traditions.<sup>[160][161][162]</sup> Twenty one avatars of Shiva are also described in Shaivism texts, but unlike Vaishnava traditions, Shaiva traditions have focussed directly on Shiva rather than the Avatar concept.<sup>[153]</sup>

## Major regional and pan-Indian Hindu deities



The ten avatars of Vishnu, (Clockwise, from top left) Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Vamana, Krishna, Kalki, Buddha, Parshurama, Rama and Narasimha, (in centre) Radha and Krishna. Painting currently in Victoria and Albert Museum.

Name	Other Names	Avatārs or Associated Deities	Geography	Image	Early illustrative art
Vishnu	<u>Nārāyana</u> , <u>Venkateshwara</u> , <u>Jagannatha</u> <u>Dattatreya</u> , <u>Hari</u> , ,Other names of Lord <u>Rama</u> and <u>Krishna</u>	Matsya, Kurma, Varāha, Nr̄simha, Vāmana, Parashurāma, Rāma, Krshna, Kalki, Vithoba, Gopāl, Balaram, Lady Mohini, Buddha, Naraentre (那羅延 天, Japan)	India, Nepal, Sri Lanka		 2nd century BCE
Shiva	Mahādeva, <u>Pashupati</u> , <u>Tripurantaka</u> , <u>Vishwanatha</u> , <u>Dakshinamurthy</u> , <u>Kālāntaka</u> , <u>Bhairava</u> , <u>Rudra</u> , <u>Nataraja</u> , <u>Sadashiva</u> , <u>Dattatreya</u>	Batara Guru (Indonesia) <sup>[163]</sup> <sup>[164]</sup> Achalanatha (Japan) <sup>[165]</sup> <sup>[166]</sup>	India, Nepal, Sri Lanka		 1st century BCE <sup>[167]</sup>
Brahmā	Aadi-Prajāpati, Virinci, Vaidyanaatha, Vakpati, Varishtadeva, Kamalaja, Srashtaa, Kartaa, Dhaataa	Bonten (Japan) <sup>[168]</sup> Phra Phrom (Thailand)	India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia		 6th century CE
Ganesha	Ganapati, <u>Vināyaka</u> , <u>Lambodara</u> , <u>Gajānana</u>	Kangiten (Japan)	India, Nepal, Sri Lanka		 7th century CE
Kārtikeya	Skanda, Murugan, Mangal, Kumaraswamy, Subramanya, Shanmuga		India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Nepal		 2nd century BCE
Pārvati	<u>Uma</u> , <u>Devi</u> , <u>Gauri</u> , <u>Durga</u> , <u>Kāli</u> , <u>Annapurna</u>	Umahi (烏摩妃, Japan) Dewi Sri (Indonesia) <sup>[169]</sup>	India, Nepal, Sri Lanka		

					
<u>Lakshmi</u>	<u>Sri Devi, Gajalakshmi, Kamalāsanā</u>	<u>Sita, Radha, Kisshōten (Japan)</u> <u>Nang Kwak (Thailand)</u> <sup>[170]</sup>	India, Nepal, Sri Lanka		 1st century BCE
<u>Saraswati</u>	<u>Vāgishvari, Vīnāpāni, Sharda</u>	<u>Benzaiten (Japan), Biāncáitiān (China), Thurathadi (Myanmar), Suratsawadi (Thailand)</u> <sup>[171]</sup>	India, Nepal, Java, Bali, Sri Lanka		 10th century CE
<u>Durgā</u>	<u>Pārvati, Kāli, Mahishāsuramardini</u>	<u>Betari Durga (Indonesia)</u> <sup>[172]</sup>	India, Nepal, Sri Lanka		 8th century CE
<u>Kāli</u>	<u>Durga, Parvati</u>		India, Nepal, Sri Lanka		 12th century CE
<u>Mariamman</u>	<u>Durga, Parvati</u>		India (mostly in South India), Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka		 10th century CE
Harihara (Half Vishnu - Half Shiva)	ShankaraNarayana		India, Sri Lanka, Nepal		

				
<u>Ardhanārīshvara</u> (Half Shiva - Half Parvati)		India, Nepal, Sri Lanka		
<u>Hanuman</u>	<u>Anjaneya, Maruthi, Bajarangbali, Langura</u>	India, Nepal, Sri Lanka		

## See also

- [Hindu denominations](#)
- [Hindu iconography](#)
- [Hindu mythology](#)
- [Puranas](#)
- [List of Hindu deities](#)
- [Rigvedic deities](#)

## Notes

1. For translation of *deva* in singular noun form as "a deity, god", and in plural form as "the gods" or "the heavenly or shining ones", see: [Monier-Williams 2001](#), p. 492 and [Renou 1964](#), p. 55
2. [a] Hark, Lisa; DeLisser, Horace (2011). *Achieving Cultural Competency*. John Wiley & Sons. "Three gods, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, and other deities are considered manifestations of and are worshipped as incarnations of Brahman."
- [b] [Toropov & Buckles 2011](#): The members of various Hindu sects worship a dizzying number of specific deities and follow innumerable rites in honor of specific gods. Because this is Hinduism, however, its practitioners see the profusion of forms and practices as expressions of the same unchanging reality. The panoply of deities are understood by believers as symbols for a single transcendent reality.
- [d] Orlando O. Espín, James B. Nickoloff (2007). *An Introductory Dictionary of Theology and Religious Studies*. Liturgical Press. "While Hindus believe in many devas, many are

monotheistic to the extent that they will recognise only one Supreme Being, a God or Goddess who is the source and ruler of the devas."

3. The list of Vedic Devas somewhat varies across the manuscripts found in different parts of South Asia, particularly in terms of guides (Aswins) and personified Devas. One list based on Book 2 of Aitareya Brahmana is:<sup>[107][108]</sup>

- Devas personified: Indra (Śakra), Varuṇa, Mitra, Aryaman, Bhaga, Ārṣa, Vidhatr (Brahma),<sup>[109]</sup> Tvāṣṭṛ, Pūṣan, Vivasvat, Savitr (Dhatr), Vishnu.
- Devas as abstractions or inner principles: Ānanda (bliss, inner contentment), Vijñāna (knowledge), Manas (mind, thought), Prāṇa (life-force), Vāc (speech), Ātmā (Self within each person), and five manifestations of **Rudra/Shiva** – Īśāna, Tatpuruṣa, Aghora, Vāmadeva, Sadyojāta
- Devas as forces or principles of nature – Prthivī (earth), Agni (fire), Antarikṣa (atmosphere, space), Jal (water), Vāyu (wind), Dyaus (sky), Sūrya (sun), Nakṣatra (stars), Soma (moon)
- Devas as guide or creative energy – Vasatkara, Prajāpati

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5. Renou 1964, p. 55
6. **Mike Burley** (2012), *Classical Samkhya and Yoga - An Indian Metaphysics of Experience*, Routledge, [ISBN 978-0415648875](#), pp. 39-41;  
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## External links

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- A chart of the main Hindu deities (<https://web.archive.org/web/20140203215148/http://www.usefulcharts.com/religion/main-hindu-gods-chart.html>) (with pictures)
- Collection: "Hindu Gods and Goddesses" (<https://exchange.umma.umich.edu/resources/23738>) from the [University of Michigan Museum of Art](#)
- "Deities in Stone: Hindu Sculpture from the Collections of the Asian Art Museum" exhibition (<https://www.sfmuseum.org/exhibitions/deities-stone-hindu-sculpture-collections-asian-art-museum>) at the [SFO Museum](#)
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